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Statement submitted by Zonta International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Zonta International, a global organization pledged to empower women through service and advocacy, with the support of the undersigned organizations, presents to the participants of the 63rd Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women the following statement for consideration of the Commission in its deliberations on social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

Worldwide, almost 650 million women alive today were married before their 18th birthdays; and, each year, another 12 million girls are married before the age of 18. Experts estimate that if there is no reduction in child marriage, the global number of women married as children will reach 1.2 billion by 2050.

Poverty, gender inequality, traditional social norms, customary and religious laws that condone child, early or forced marriage, inadequate legislative frameworks, lack of education and the state of a country's civil registration system are all drivers of child, early and forced marriage.

The consequences of child, early and forced marriage for girls are devastating. It robs girls of their childhoods, education and social interactions with their peers, pushing girls into an early reproductive role and exacerbating the problem of rapid population growth with harmful consequences for them, their children, household, community and society. Child brides are more likely to become victims of domestic violence and to contract HIV and other sexually-transmitted diseases. Forced to become sexually active and pregnant before their bodies have fully matured, child brides are also more likely to suffer devastating injuries like obstetric fistula or die due to complications during childbirth.

Child, early and forced marriage is a gross violation of human rights, but it is also a sustainable development issue. While Target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals is critical to galvanizing support for actions to reduce child marriage globally, the Sustainable Development Goals related to poverty, health, education, nutrition, food security, economic growth and reduction of inequality will also not be achieved unless significant progress is made on reducing child marriage.

While child, early and forced marriage is a global issue that can be found in cultures, religions, ethnicities and countries around the world, the drivers of child, early and forced marriage vary by country. Any strategies to address child marriage, therefore, need to be tailored to a local context and to the specific needs of girls at risk and of girls already married. It will require the concerted effort of governments, civil society, families and young people working together to prevent girls from marrying too young and to support those already married as girls.

From 2018 to 2020, Zonta International is investing 2 million USD in the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage, in addition to 2 million USD to two other international projects in cooperation with UN agencies and 1 million USD for Zonta's own educational scholarships and awards for women and girls. The focus of Zonta's global and local service and advocacy work is on achievement of Goal No. 5, Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls with a specific focus on eliminating child marriage.

Zonta International calls on the United Nations and its Member States to find effective short-term and long-term methods to eliminate child, early and forced marriage and empower all women and girls. Strategies to address child, early and forced marriage should:

- Recognize adolescent girls as active participants and not passive recipients in efforts to end child, early and forced marriage and empower girls at risk of marriage and those girls who have already married to understand and exercise their rights.

- Programs like the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage engage adolescent girls through targeted programs, including life skills, health information, economic empowerment and social protection.

- Strengthen health, education, child protection and social protection systems to improve services for adolescent girls.

  - Health care providers need training, so they can be more responsive to the specific healthcare needs of girls, including married girls. Social protection systems need to be better integrated and prepared to respond to abuse, exploitation and violence against adolescent girls and to identify and respond to cases of child marriage and those adolescent girls at risk of child marriage.

- Ensure access to quality education at all levels, improve retention rates, support interventions that encourage girls to enrol in school and make the transition from primary to secondary school, and address the unique needs of young married girls to allow them to return to school and complete their education.

  - Lack of secondary schools in many rural areas means girls often live very far from the nearest school. Girls need to be able to travel safely to and from school, and school facilities must include sex-segregated toilets and washing facilities, complying with SDG targets 4.A and 6.2, so girls do not miss school once they begin menstruating. Married girls need to be allowed and encouraged to return to school and should be supported with catch-up classes and childcare services if needed.

  - In Madagascar, UNICEF's Let Us Learn program, funded by Zonta International, is using conditional cash transfers, medical, legal and social support and other social protection strategies to ensure that families and communities protect girls from early marriage and keep them in school, while at the same time encouraging adolescent girls who have married and had children to return to school to continue their education through the provision of catch up classes and child care services.

- Provide out of school girls with alternative learning opportunities and income generation.

  - In Sierra Leone, one of the 12 countries of the Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage, more than 12,000 adolescent girls strengthened their leadership and decision-making skills and economic empowerment through life skills training; and, in Zambia, a national multisectoral action plan is providing vocational training and employment opportunities for adolescent girls.

All girls should enjoy equal rights and be able to realize their full potential. They should know their rights and be empowered to decide if, when and who to marry. Governments, civil society organizations, local civil and religious leaders and families must work together to ensure adolescent girls have access to the necessary social systems, public services and infrastructure to empower them to say no to child, early and forced marriage, complete their education and realize their full potential. These actions will have positive consequences for the well-being of adolescent girls, their future children, the communities in which they live and sustainable development overall.

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